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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000486

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [FJ](#)  
SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 11/9: BAINIMARAMA SKIPS GCC; QARASE  
LAYS OUT HIS CASE; DELEGATION TO CAMP

REF: SUVA 483

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

#### Summary

1. (C) Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama declined to attend Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) session on Nov. 9, claiming the chiefs' minds were already made up. PM Qarase told the GCC he is ready to discuss a list of issues the Army provided him yesterday. He said the key, though, is the Army's role in governance. Qarase elaborated on his views of three controversial bills, which he said "will not be withdrawn" but which are open for discussion and revision. Qarase said the current crisis between two Fijian-led institutions merits GCC consideration. In the p.m., the GCC decided to send a chiefly delegation to attempt to meet with Bainimarama at the Army camp before a second day of discussion takes place Friday. On the side, Fiji's Cabinet on Tuesday considered several "good governance" bills that have been long awaited; Australia reiterated that its recently arrived contingent of troops is not a mercenary force; and the Ministry of Home Affairs CEO has been suspended, presumably for colluding with the military. End summary.

#### Bainimarama: my way or the highway

2. (C) RFMF Commander Bainimarama decided not to attend the Great Council of Chiefs meeting on Nov. 9. He told the media that his only interest in attending was if the GCC would endorse his views; but he could see that the GCC was going to take the Government's side. Asked if the GCC might be a useful means for stimulating useful discussion on ways out of Fiji's current crisis, Bainimarama, in effect, said: only if they accept the Army's point of view.

#### Qarase: ready for talks

3. (U) PM Qarase did attend the GCC meeting. In prepared remarks, he noted that the Army delivered a document to him Wednesday with a list of issues to be discussed. Qarase said he is ready to engage in talks. He described the basic issue as the Army's role in Fiji. That question has now been referred to the Supreme Court. Qarase noted that the Army has objected to three bills: the reconciliation (RTUB) bill; the qoliqoli (foreshore rights) bill; and the Indigenous Claims Tribunal (ICT) bill. Qarase said that Bainimarama, shortly after appointing Qarase as interim PM in July 2000, had endorsed all three bills in concept. On the RTUB, Qarase recalled a healthy public debate that has led to a revised bill, yet to be introduced, in which the amnesty clause is "dropped."

Tells GCC all sides will have opportunity to debate bills

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¶4. (U) Qarase said the Qoligoli and ICT bills, which have been introduced, are important to the Fijian people, since they will safeguard Fijian interests through Fijian administrative mechanisms. He stressed that everyone accepts the 1997 Constitution and its themes of good governance, equality under the law, and a prohibition on discrimination based on ethnicity. Yet, he said, the 1987 and 1999 elections (that brought ethnic-Indian-dominated parties to power), were a "harsh reminder" that Fijian leadership is "no longer guaranteed in a democracy." Fijian mechanisms that protect Fijian rights are necessary. Thus, the qoligoli and ICT bills "will not be withdrawn." Still, he promised extensive Parliamentary reviews, as took place with the RTUB, taking into account the interests of the whole population.

Crisis is Fijian v. Fijian; need reconciliation for all

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¶5. (U) Qarase concluded by observing that Fiji's current crisis is between a Fijian-led government and a Fijian-led army. Thus, the GCC is an appropriate forum for seeking wise advice. He expressed hope leaders of Fiji can "find our way to peace and reconciliation for all."

GCC delegation to Army Camp; meeting to resume tomorrow

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¶6. (U) In late afternoon, the GCC adjourned, with a second session planned for Friday. In the meantime, a delegation of chiefs from the Kubuna Confederacy, which claims the allegiance of Bainimarama's clan, is to visit the Army camp in an attempt to discuss the pending issues with Bainimarama directly.

SUVA 00000486 002 OF 002

Cabinet moves on "good governance" bills

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¶7. (C) Meanwhile, in a meeting on Tuesday, Nov. 7, the Fiji Cabinet received and decided to circulate among stakeholders a "Standards of Leadership Conduct" bill; approved in principle a draft "Freedom of Information" bill; approved the drafting of an "Anti-Corruption Commission" bill; and approved the terms of reference for a mid-term in-depth assessment of affirmative action programs, among other decisions. Qarase had noted such "good governance" steps were in the works, but they had not previously seen the light of day. Some observers suggested the flurry of activity proves Bainimarama's point: RFMF pressure brings results.

Aussies reiterate the facts

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¶8. (U) After Bainimarama described a contingent of recently-arrived Australian soldiers in Fiji as "mercenaries" during a press event Wednesday (reftel), Australia's Chief of Defense Force phoned the Commodore to confirm that Australian Defense Force personnel had traveled to Fiji to assist the Australian High Commission and to note that Australia had already publicly acknowledged that to be the case. An Aussie press release said that, at the conclusion of the conversation, Bainimarama "acknowledged the facts as set out above."

Home Affairs CEO suspended

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¶9. (U) Fiji's Public Service Commission announced Nov. 9 that it has suspended Home Affairs Ministry CEO Lesi Korovavala. Lesi, a former RFMF officer, who for many months appeared to be one of Bainimarama's main targets of complaint, allegedly has visited the Army camp in recent weeks to collude with the RFMF against the Government. We recall that after the May elections, Lesi was one of those who reportedly broke into tears during a reconciliation ceremony between the RFMF and Home Affairs.

Comment

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¶10. (C) Qarase laid out his case to the GCC in a well-crafted speech that accents his ethnic-Fijian, some would say Fijian-nationalist, credentials, but also professes acceptance of a broader national interest. That balancing act is easier said than done. The assurance that qoliqoli and ICT bills will get a full and fair hearing is useful, as is the appearance of "good governance" issues before Cabinet. It appears the GCC is going the extra mile with Bainimarama, in an effort to play a role in the current crisis. The Commodore's justification for stilting the GCC today illustrates his dogmatic view that he has the answers...period.

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